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# THE TOUCHSTONE



and THE AMERICAN ART STUDENT MAGAZINE

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Vol. VI

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND JOHN DRINKWATER: BY MARGUERITE WILKINSON

*"And Lincoln was the lord of his event."—From Abraham Lincoln, by John Drinkwater.*



ABRAHAM LINCOLN is our Titan in homespun whose ungainly body and awkward bearing could not inhibit the beauty and grace of his spirit. Time and custom could not fit the rhythms of his great personality into the measure of any small pattern. His heart was larger than the continent on which he lived, for he knew that all nations dwelling upon the earth are of one blood. And yet he typifies not only all that is large and generous, but all that is essentially American, also. In him we find the grand reaches of the Rocky Mountains, the broad, friendly spaces of the mid-western prairies. His humor was strong, plentiful, indigenous as the corn of Iowa and Illinois. He has become a symbol of the best that our country has produced, and therefore, to all of us, he is inexpressibly dear. In essence, Abraham Lincoln was, and still is, America.

It is natural, therefore, that we should scrutinize jealously any attempt to present him to the world of literature. Our intellects tell us that he belongs to the world and to the ages, but our hearts insist that he belongs to us and that we understand him best. And now that an English poet, John Drinkwater, has written a play called "Abraham Lincoln" and brought it here to be produced for us in our theaters, it is inevitable that we should ask many questions about him. What of John Drinkwater? Why has he chosen to write about our hero? How has he understood him? That readers of THE TOUCHSTONE might have Mr. Drinkwater's own answers to some of these questions I called upon Mr. and Mrs. Drinkwater one afternoon and we talked about "Abraham Lincoln."

First of all, John Drinkwater is emphatically English. It is not that he emphasizes it. It is simply that the kind fates have provided that destiny for him and that he has accepted it gracefully. He has

## LINCOLN AND DRINKWATER

the English quietude of manner, the English poise and reserve. He is tall, in early middle age, and has an excellent voice and enunciation. Mrs. Drinkwater, who plays the part of Susan in "Abraham Lincoln" at the Birmingham Repertory Theater, when they are at home in England, told me a little about his life.

**J**OHN DRINKWATER was born at Leytonstone, near London, in Eighteen Hundred and Eighty-two, and, while he was still a little boy, was sent to school in Oxford, where he remained until he was nearly sixteen years of age. He then left school and went to work in an insurance office. After a number of years of business life, he married. At about the same time he learned that he was more interested in the drama than in business or any other kind of work. He gave up business, and, after many struggles, succeeded in getting the start he wanted. Then Barry Jackson, who, according to Mr. Drinkwater, is the best stage-designer in England, built The Birmingham Repertory Theater, of which he and Mr. Drinkwater are coöperating managers. In that theater, in the past few years, have been presented more than a hundred of the greatest plays the world has ever known—plays that are great not only as literature, but also by virtue of their human appeal. It occurred to me to ask how successful such performances had been. I learned that Mr. Drinkwater has all of the good dramatist's faith in the ordinary audience.

"Then you believe in the people?" I asked.

"As an audience, yes," he said. "The people are absolutely sound in their instincts, absolutely right in their response to the feeling in a play. Of course, as critics, they may be quite helpless. The little working girls of Birmingham who come to our plays again and again and enjoy them heartily could not tell us why they are good plays, or even why they like them. If they were to try, they would tell us something about what one of the characters had said or done. But they would only be telling of the thing they *think* they like. What they really like in a play, what any audience likes, is the thing that is hidden by the skill of the dramatist—the essential dramatic quality. People who know the stage can find that in any good play. An audience always responds to it."

"There are people who maintain that Shakespeare was not a good dramatist," Mr. Drinkwater continued, "because the cleverness of his dramatic construction does not show upon the surface of his plays. If it did, however, they would seem artificial to the audience. But the people know drama because they know life. It is the most democratic of the arts."

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I REALIZED that the time had come to ask Mr. Drinkwater the question that everybody asks him.

"How did you happen to write a play about Lincoln?"

He seemed amused.

"I am working in the theater all the time," he said, "and always have three or four plays in mind. When they are ready I get to work and write them. The character of Lincoln crystallized a great deal of experience that I had in mind, waiting for dramatic expression."

"I notice," I said, "that you have chosen for emphasis in presenting Lincoln that quality of his which we think of as being characteristic of the best Englishmen—a poise and tolerance in weighing one thing against another and taking a just and wise middle ground in controversy, between the rash extremes."

"That is something that I think the best Englishmen and the best Americans have in common," said Mr. Drinkwater.

"In presenting this phase of Lincoln's character," I said, "you were selective. You did not present the whole Lincoln, fully rounded. You have not attempted to show all of him—his humor, for instance."

"Life is very large," said Mr. Drinkwater, "and to have art you must select something from life and give it attention by itself. Suppose you make a selection and take history. Even then, history is very large. You select again, and take biography, the life-story of a single man. But if you would make a play you cannot have even the whole of a biography. People vary from day to day. It is not possible to put the whole man into a play. In writing about Lincoln I chose to present the lonely administrator who kept his poise under the greatest difficulties, who was the lord of his event."

"Have you been criticized for this?" I asked.

"Not severely. Critics have been generous. Some of them have criticized the play because it is written in the English idiom, not in the American. But I could not write sincerely and simply unless I wrote as I did. I do not know the American idiom. It would take a long time to learn it. And it was no part of my purpose. To imitate it superficially would have been very bad art and unworthy of a great theme. If I were to write about Achilles, I should not try to write like a Greek. Why, then, should I try to write about Lincoln as an American would? On any theme a man can write his best only in the speech he knows best."

I wondered what John Drinkwater would think of George Gray Barnard's homely, fearless, fully rounded Lincoln. I asked him.

"I think," he said slowly and respectfully, "that it is a very great work of art; perhaps the greatest that America has produced."



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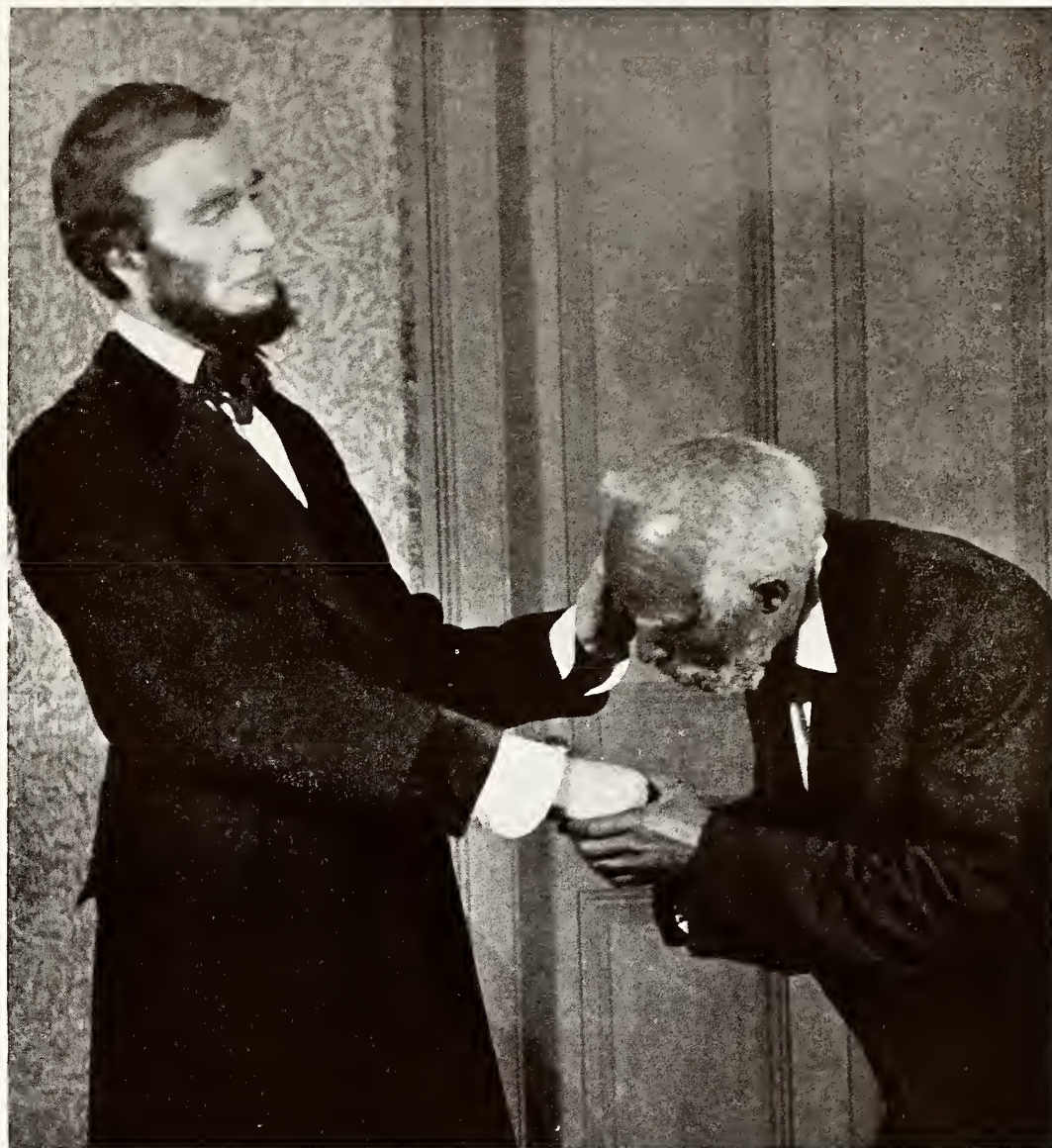
**M**EDITATING on what Mr. Drinkwater had said, I went home and re-read "Abraham Lincoln." It is an interesting play. It has been successful in London and is likely to be successful here. The two chroniclers, to be sure, who speak their lyrical lines between the scenes that are written in prose, speak English lyrics of the English countryside. *Susan*, the little servant who follows the fortunes of the Lincolns from Springfield to Washington (in the play), is a thoroughly English housemaid. The neighbors who call to congratulate Lincoln on his nomination are decidedly English neighbors. The negro minister who calls on Lincoln at the White House talks as the Indians did in Fenimore Cooper's novels. Lincoln himself takes on something of the English reserve and sedateness of manner. But each scene in the play emphasizes in its own way that lonely poise in administration which Mr. Drinkwater set out to dramatize. The note is sounded for the first time, strongly, in the speech in which Lincoln replies to the congratulations of his friend, Mr. Stone. The dialogue is as follows:

*"Mr. Stone:* It makes a humble body almost afraid of himself, Abraham, to know his friend is to be one of the great ones of the earth; with his yes and no law for these many, many thousands of folk.

*"Lincoln:* It makes a man humble to be chosen so, Samuel. So humble that no man but would say 'No' to such bidding if he dare. To be President of this people, and trouble gathering everywhere in men's hearts. That's a searching thing. Bitterness, and scorn, and wrestling often with men I shall despise, and perhaps nothing truly done at the end. But I must go."

The same note is sounded again, much more strongly, in Lincoln's answer to the delegation sent him from the Republican Convention to offer him the nomination:

*"Lincoln:* I can take any man's ridicule—I'm trained to it by a . . . somewhat odd figure that it pleased God to give me, if I may be so far pleasant with you. But this slavery business will be long, and deep, and bitter. I know it. If you do me this honour, gentlemen, you must look to me for no compromise in this matter. If abolition comes in due time by constitutional means, good. I want it. But, while we will not force abolition, we will give slavery no approval, and we will not allow it to extend its boundaries by one yard. The determination is in my blood. When I was a boy I made a trip to New Orleans, and there I saw them, chained, beaten, kicked as a man would be ashamed to kick a thieving dog. And I saw a young girl driven up and down the room that the bidders might satisfy themselves. And I said then, 'If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard.'"



FRANK McGLYNN WHO PLAYS ABRAHAM  
LINCOLN IN DRINKWATER'S PLAY.





JOHN DRINKWATER, THE ENGLISH PLAY-  
WRIGHT, WHOSE "ABRAHAM LINCOLN"  
IS NEW YORK'S PLAY OF THE HOUR.



## LINCOLN AND DRINKWATER

EVERY scene gives evidence of this superb moral stamina. It is shown in the scene with Hook, the character Mr. Drinkwater has invented as a kind of moral scapegoat for the cabinet. It is shown in the scene in which the President chats with his wife and two women who are calling upon her, and rebukes the militaristic Mrs. Goliath Blow. It is shown, not only in the scenes, but in each of the lyrical interludes. Of the two years of warfare and of Lincoln's bearing, one chronicler says:

Two years of darkness, and this man but grows  
Greater in resolution, more constant in compassion.  
He goes

The way of dominion in pitiful, high-hearted fashion.

For those who may desire to know just what part Mrs. Lincoln took in the life of her great husband Mr. Drinkwater has provided information in one of the most interesting speeches in the play:

*Mrs. Lincoln:* You said this was a great evening for me. It is, and I'll say more than I mostly do, because it is. I'm likely to go into history now with a great man. For I know better than any how great he is. I'm plain looking and I've a sharp tongue, and I've a mind that doesn't always go in his easy, high way. And that history will see, and it will laugh a little, and say, "Poor Abraham Lincoln." That's all right, but it's not all. I've always known when he should go forward, and when he should hold back. I've watched, and watched, and what I've learnt America will profit by. There are women like that, lots of them. But I'm lucky. My work's going farther than Illinois—it's going farther than any of us can tell. I made things easy for him to think and think when we were poor, and now his thinking has brought him to this. They wanted to make him Governor of Oregon, and he would have gone and have come to nothing there. I stopped him. Now they're coming to ask him to be President, and I've told him to go.

We can find our great man in this little blue book, though not fully rounded out as we know it through intimate tradition. He is bereft of his humor and his folk feeling. But he is still a great man reverently presented. His idealism has been understood by a dramatist wise enough to deal with his character simply and sincerely.

*First Chronicler:* Events go by. And upon circumstance  
Disaster strikes with the blind sweep of chance,  
And this our mimic action was a theme,  
Kinsmen, as life is, clouded as a dream.

*Second Chronicler:* But, as we spoke, presiding everywhere  
Upon event was one man's character.  
And that endures; it is the token sent  
Always to man for man's own government.



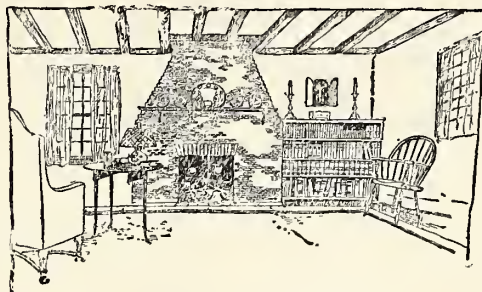
## RETURN: BY EMERY POTTLE

F she should come tomorrow,  
Singing to my heart's door,  
My Springtime and my Sorrow,  
My Ghost of Nevermore—  
Were fleet her white feet winging,  
And full her red lips singing—  
What holds my house in store?

Would she sit down by the little fire,  
Eat of the evening fare—  
Sing me the song of Heart's Desire,  
Her old enchanting air?  
O 'twere the shallow seeming  
Of nights I once lived dreaming  
When she and love were there.

With my lips, at day's gray breaking,  
I'd touch her drowsy hand  
(But O my heart's gray waking  
She could not understand!)  
And bid her follow—follow—  
The last wild-winged swallow  
Back to her Summer land.





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